

When Isolation is a Blessing: A Testimony

As a child, I was never afraid of the dark.

I was so preoccupied with dreams of singing on large stages or traveling around the world that I never thought about things “going bump in the dark.” This made me pretty independent. Night after night, I went peaceably to my bed and slept pretty well.

I took my bravery during the night as a signal that fear wasn’t a problem for me, at all. That’s until a few years ago when I was assigned to a remote part of the country to pastor. I was there for 2.5 years and I saw a completely different version of myself. Again, visible darkness was not a problem. This time, it was the distance from friends and family that was scary. Left alone with my thoughts, it felt like the world was on mute. I have honestly never been more afraid, in my life. In that moment I discovered, in the worst way, that I wasn’t afraid of the dark; I was afraid of solitude.

The Mistake of Equating “Activity” With Importance

Like high-calorie comfort food, I LOVE being surrounded by friends, loved ones and supporters. And this new period of solitude quickly revealed to me one of my greatest mistakes: equating “activity” with importance. I’m sure many of you can relate. Personally, my schedule has been hectic since I was a teenager. Choir rehearsals, church functions, school and assignments, concerts, sports practices and games all made me feel productive and that my life was meaningful. In fact, when asked to define myself, it wasn’t uncommon for me to rattle-off a list of activities so that the questioner could perceive me as “somebody.”

But this new period of solitude was uncomfortable because the isolation removed all of the “noise” of busyness. Immediately, I experienced withdrawal symptoms. I slept constantly. Soon, I began experiencing panic attacks. And even found myself “binging” for activity. My discomfort with solitude was so unbearable I would drive long hours just to be around people. I gained weight, then I lost weight. Scrambling for human interaction, I remember calling friends almost daily to “check-in” or “just say hello.” I would play movies or music almost constantly. It wasn’t until I began to pray for deliverance that God sent people to tell me exactly what had been happening. This isolation was not by chance or happenstance. God turned off the noise Himself.

The God of the Still Small Voice

Elijah had a similar experience. In 1 Kings 19 we find the prophet standing victoriously on Mt. Carmel. He had just faithfully defended the true God of Israel in an epic showdown between himself and 850 false prophets. Having valiantly represented the Lord of Lords, one would think Elijah would be honored. Well, instead of a victory parade or medal of honor, Elijah received a death threat from Jezebel, Queen of Israel. This sends Elijah running. Scared for his life, the prophet seeks protection in the caves of the mountains. It’s there that Elijah is met with true isolation and solitude.

And after 40 days of travel and solitary wandering, Elijah is confronted by the Lord:

“What are you doing here Elijah?” (1 Kings 19:9 NKJV)

And the prophet answers,

“I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and killed Your prophets with the sword. I alone am left; and they seek to take my life” (1 Kings 19:10 NKJV).

Not just separated from human interaction, Elijah felt like he was the only one left who still believed in the one true God. This magnified Elijah's isolation and solitude. In His mind there was absolutely no community for him. There was not one group of like-minded believers he could find safety and comfort in. No one believed in Yahweh anymore. And worse yet, those who used to now wanted Elijah dead.

It's in this moment when Elijah experiences God as he has never experienced Him before. The Bible says that God passed by and there was a strong wind, then a mighty earthquake, and finally, a fire. But the Bible says that God wasn't in any of it. Instead, God was in the still small voice.

Can You Recognize God in the Still Small Voice?

Connected with God so intimately, Elijah knew that activity alone does not constitute the presence of God. Yes, all of his senses were stimulated. Elijah watched, heard, felt, saw, and smelled every attack against the mountain. But even as the environment around him morphed changing with each new event, Elijah sensed the emptiness in all the activity.

Here, Elijah teaches us that there can be quaking, lightning, cracks of thunder, strong winds, and even fire, and God can be completely absent from it all. This great prophet shows us that it's in solitude that we can experience one of the greatest blessings of all: communion with God in a still small voice.

I imagine it was a whisper that wafted through the cave. A voice so distinct, so recognizable that it's what drew Elijah to the mouth of the cave. It was this still small voice that Elijah followed forward with the expectation of meeting God.

Finding the Blessing in the Stillness

Society will have you believe that productivity means constant busyness. But that's just it. Busyness is not productivity. Oftentimes, it's just procrastination. Rarely are we getting what we need to get done. Nor are we even doing what's most important. And the fact of the matter is, our body, mind, and spirit requires moments of solitude for restoration. As the body experiences sickness as a desperate cry for healing and wholeness, so the weary soul cries out for quiet and rest by getting you to shut down.

The travel schedule dwindles, business becomes light, employment requires a

move to a new town, and soon you are transitioned into a period of silence. But it's important to remember that silence is not punitive. Solitude and isolation are not signs we've done something wrong. The silence is only a natural companion to our busy and productive seasons. You'll always have both. The fact is, we can either come aside and rest awhile, or despise the rest period. But either way, God will send it to detox you and usher you into a particular kind of experience with Him.

As you consider your times of silence, I'd like to challenge you to think of them as opportunities where God is removing the obstacles that create distance between you and Him. It is my prayer that God teaches all of us how to adjust to both the times of busyness, and the times of stillness. It is in both that we become well-rounded in Him.